# CHAPTER VIII

## CHILDHOOD

858 [582] In the days before the buffalo disappeared and before formal schooling was available, childhood, it was said, for girls was shorter and for boys was longer than at present. A girl was ordinarily given in marriage before she was twelve years old—certainly before she attained physiological maturity. A boy on the other hand, though seemingly anxious to participate in hunting and in war as soon as he was able, was not forced to bear the full responsibilities of adulthood until the end of adolescence. While there was considerable variation from family to family in the amount of time required of children in training for practical tasks, all enjoyed a considerable amount of "free time."

### PLAY

857 526 [493] Singer and Coming Daylight, the two oldest of our informants, in recalling the amusements and pastimes of their youth, decided that sliding down hills was one of the most pleasurable as it could be done at any time of the year. In winter, when there was snow, the boys used a kind of sled made by lashing buffalo rib-bones together. Girls managed just as well by simply sitting on their robes and holding between their legs the end which usually hung free. In summer a stiff buffalo hide was used for sliding down the grassy slopes.[1] [524] When the water was frozen, boys and girls alike skated with their feet on the ice, thus clearing a slick surface on which to spin their tops made of horn.

857 526 481 Swimming, however, was the great sport in summer. Girls left their dresses close to the bank, those of the older girls in a neat row closest to the edge and those of the smaller girls in the next row. Beginners used the dog-paddle, but the boys developed profi-

[1] For this and some other types of amusement, see Kroeber, 1908, pp. 190-91.

2: Flannery E-5 (1940-1948) 1953
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trimming for women's clothing. I knew that the body of a girl had been among those left in the branches of the trees at this place, so I decided that the bear had disturbed the bodies and must have eaten the cloth along with everything else. I stood there quite a while wondering whether I should take those elk teeth. Finally I took them and having strung them on a piece of sinew laid them in the stream-bed with a rock covering them. When I went home I opened the matter with my grandmother by stating: 'A bear ate that girl who was buried in the elk tooth dress.' When my grandmother asked how I knew this, I told her about the elk teeth in the excrement. Whereupon my grandmother asked: 'Why didn't you take those teeth? They are valuable.' Feeling easier in my mind, I said: 'I was afraid you would accuse me of stealing them—but I did take them anyway!' My grandmother was glad and so I brought them from the creek and I was happy, too, since there were enough teeth to make two rows on my dress."

The usual procedure of careful parents when a child reported he had found some article was to first question him as to whether or not he had taken it from someone. Then the parent would go around and ask people if they had lost this certain article. If a child had stolen it he would thus be found out and it was believed that he would never steal anything again.

The rights of children to their own property were recognized by elders and, while they admonished children to take good care of their things, if a child wished to dispose of what belonged to him no one would reprimand him for having done so. After all, generosity is a trait that was much admired among the Gros Ventres. Informants said that if, for instance, a man had given a horse to his daughter and she gave it away, he would say nothing to her about it. Should she ask him for another he might, however, tell her: "Well, I don't know—you might give it away." But he would never scold her about it.

Even if a child were flagrantly disobedient he would ordinarily be punished only by a scolding rather than by whipping or deprivation. Singer and Coming Daylight both were shocked at the idea that a child might be punished by depriving him of something. They said: "Indians love their children and we don't think they would deprive them of anything. They just talk to their children

and tell them what is right." Coming Daylight gave an account of an occasion on which she was disobedient. "One of my relatives was very ill and my grandmother thought that if I would sacrifice a finger joint, he would get well. But I was a small girl, and I dreaded the idea of having part of my finger cut off, so I ran away. My uncle chased after me and told me never to come back. I yelled at him: 'I won't come back, but I am not going to have my finger cut off!' So I went far off and stayed out in the hills until my uncle came looking for me and brought me home again. Two nights after they had asked me to give up my finger, the relative died, but they didn't punish me."

If a child were really lazy or "pouted too much," he might be "thrown out"—cases were mentioned where this had actually happened. The theory was that the child would then have to work much harder than he would have at home for whoever would take him in.

In the case of temper tantrums on the part of a very young child, he was first simply told to stop. Should he continue, his guardian would say: "Oh well, he doesn't know any better" and then douse him with cold water. It was said that he would get up immediately after that type of treatment, and would soon be cured.

If a child were naughty or made a mistake, his guardian would usually not reprimand him in public. He would wait for an opportunity to get him alone. As an example, in training for proper attitudes and behavior between brother and sister, the boy was told: "Be careful what you say in front of your sister." If the boy then made some remark he should not have made in the presence of his sister, his mother waited until the sister had gone out and then talked to him in a gentle way. Cora expanded on this by stating: "The Gros Ventres never bawl out anybody in front of a third party. This is where the white social workers make their biggest mistake. They get everybody together in a central place and then proceed to reprimand the various ones in front of all the others. That is the worst thing that can happen—it hurts these Gros Ventres so badly."

Nevertheless, those in authority may give a severe "tongue lashing" to the culprit in private. As The Boy said when discussing discipline: "The Indian, when he was living the old life, had a

2: Flannery E-5 (1940-1948) 1953
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595 said to have been that the wife who was pregnant, whether senior or subsidiary, could be well cared for and was relieved of the heavier domestic tasks until a considerable time after the child was born. Furthermore, the children of all wives were considered equal in status. "As long as a man claimed the children as his own, he treated them all the same way, whether they were the children of older or younger wives." That differential treatment was sometimes accorded children by their father can be seen from the following case, although it is doubtful whether the father distinguished between his daughters simply on account of the relative position of their mothers. Singer, however, implied that it was so in giving the account of her experience: "When I was married as a younger wife to a certain man, he certainly made a difference between my child and that of his older wife. Both of us had girls, but one time, for instance, when I was out getting wood, they threw my little girl right out of the lodge. A neighbor took her in and when I returned this neighbor said to me: 'I notice they don't seem to care much for this little girl.' So after that I would have to take her with me, carrying a heavy pack on my back and dragging my little one along by the arm. Although my husband never let me use a horse, he would put the child of his other wife on the saddle when he was riding, and often he would hold her in his arms when he was around the camp. One of the worst things I had to endure was that when my husband would return from trading at Fort Benton with goodies like candy and fruit, my little girl was never given any and had to stand by and watch the other child eating. Finally it got so bad that my father took his grandchild and raised her. But I must say that this husband of mine was a really mean man."

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587 595 The general feeling prevailed that sisters got along together more peaceably as co-wives than did "rivals." In any case the sororate was preferred and it was said that parents were better satisfied to send a child-bride into the household of her sister. This attitude was exemplified by Singer's father in the following account which she gave: "I had been given to my sister's husband when I was just a child. It wasn't a real marriage because I didn't stay long enough. I was sent home by him because he thought I would rather play than work, and my sister took up for

7: Flannery E-5 (1940, 1945) 1947
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796 178 431 and we follow that. But don't stop going. You went once, so keep going.' And so I did go and when I noticed that at nearly every dance my brother gave away beef or horses—he was certainly a generous man—I started to follow his example. It got so that whenever there was a dance I was the first one there and I used to give away all kinds of things. For my adopted daughter, for instance, I gave beef, horses, and money at different times."

796 178 The final event of the program of the Grass dance during the later period was a dance by one of the owners of the feathered war-bonnets who, to the accompaniment of a special song, stepped toward the door, made three passes towards the latch and on the fourth actually opened the door, took off the bonnet and went out. Everyone by that time would be standing up ready to go with their bundles and babies. It was remarked that since they usually started the Grass dance about one in the afternoon and stopped only well after midnight, they had plenty of time for all these things.

796 178 ● 858 In this section we have dealt only with the main differences between the earlier and later forms of the Grass dance as practised by the Gros Ventres. Other minor changes were introduced from time to time, one being that of allowing children on the dancing floor. This will be briefly described merely to indicate the latitude allowed to the individual in the later period during which the Gros Ventre Grass dance flourished, and to illustrate the mechanism by which some, at least, of the changes could have been actually accomplished. My informant, who had held important offices in the Grass dance and who is a man of prominence, said that, up to the time he acted in this matter, it had been the duty of the owners of the whips to take children bold enough to mingle with the dancers and drag them off the floor by force. It was obvious to my informant that the children were anxious to dance so at one of the performances he tied a bunch of paper money to the amount of $50 on the end of a buggy whip and had the announcer call out that he was going to buy for the children the privilege of joining in the dancing; that he was not only paying for this by giving the money toward the next per-

7: Flannery E-5 (1940, 1945) 1947
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formance of the Grass dance, but that he was also paying for this by cancelling debts owed him at his store by four specific individuals whom he named; that anyone who objected to the children having the privilege would have to raise the ante; and that finally he would inaugurate this new feature of the Grass dance by having all of his own children dance first. No one disputed the point, and from that day to this children have had the freedom of the floor at any of the social gatherings.

The innovation described above was probably one of the last changes made in the form of the Grass dance before it began to disintegrate about 1916. Once the dog ritual was abandoned,—seemingly just prior to 1920,—the Grass dance as such disappeared, leaving only the round dances, one or two of which survive today and are performed at annual fairs, at celebrations of the Fourth of July, and so on.

Let us now turn to a consideration of the functions of the Grass dance in Gros Ventre culture in each of the two periods.

## Functions

*Earlier period.* When the Grass dance was first adopted by the Gros Ventres its function was a relatively minor one of replacing the dance belonging to one of the two "soldier" societies, the Wolves, or Wolf-men as the members were called. The members of the parallel society were known as Stars. These two societies were approximately equal numerically and included between them the whole Gros Ventres population of able-bodied warriors. At the age of 18 or 19 the individual Gros Ventre young man who, together with say 30-50 of his age-mates, already belonged to one of several "companies"—the Rosebushes, or Calves, or Resting-on-the-breast-of-a-woman, or Holding-dogs'-tails, and so forth,—would enter either the Wolf society or the Star society, whichever one was selected by the "company." The individual would then be either a Wolf-dancer or a Star-dancer, although he retained close personal association with the members of his "company" which would have entered one society or the other as a body. With the mates of his "company" he would then go through the